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Health Care Is Hurting Democrats

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The majority party normally loses seats in midterm elections, but the Republican resurgence of recent months is more than a conventional midterm rebound. How can a little known Republican run a competitive Senate campaign in Massachusetts? The culprit is the unpopularity of health reform, and it means that Democrats will face even worse problems later this year in less liberal places than Massachusetts.

We have polled voters in 11 states likely to have competitive Senate races in November on how they feel about health reform and how they might vote in November. The interviews were conducted from Jan. 6-11 with 500 registered voters in Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Louisiana, Missouri, Nevada, North Dakota, Ohio and Pennsylvania. The polls were conducted by YouGov using a panel of Internet users selected to be representative of the registered voters in each state.

Health reform is more popular in some of these states than in others. Where it's popular, Democratic candidates don't have too much of a problem, but where it's unpopular—and that includes most states—the Democratic Senate candidates are fighting an uphill battle. Support for health reform varies in these 11 states from a low of 33% in North Dakota to a high of 48% in Nevada. Democrats trail Republicans in six of the states; three are toss-ups; and in two, Democrats have a solid lead.

Support for the Republican Senate candidates in these races is closely related to voter opposition to the health-care Senate bill. In North Dakota and Louisiana, opponents of the bill outnumber supporters by around 30%. In North Dakota, Democrat incumbent Byron Dorgan withdrew from a difficult race, which it now appears will be won handily by Republican Gov. John Hoeven (who leads 58-30 against Heidi Heitkamp, a former attorney general of the state, and 56-29 against Rep. Earl Pomeroy). In Louisiana, Republican incumbent David Vitter, who was thought to be vulnerable, now leads Rep. Charlie Melancon by 20 points. In Delaware, 49% support the bill and Republican Rep. Mike Castle leads Beau Biden, the state's attorney general and the son of the vice president, 49%-37%.

In Nevada, the bill is relatively popular (although in none of the states does the bill receive majority support). Nonetheless, incumbent Harry Reid is in a toss-up against either Sue Lowden (a former state senator and news anchorwoman) or Danny Tarkanian (a real estate investor). In Connecticut, 44% of voters support the Senate bill and Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal leads 47%-35% against Republican Linda McMahon, former CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment, and 47%-34% against former Republican congressman Rob Simmons. In Pennsylvania and Colorado, 43% of voters support the Senate bill, and Democrats trail Republicans by 2.5 and 4.5 points, respectively.

How do we know that it's the health-reform bill that's to blame for the low poll numbers for Democratic Senate candidates and not just that these are more conservative states?

First, we asked voters how their incumbent senator voted on the health-care bill that passed on Christmas Eve. About two-thirds answered correctly. Even now, long before Senate campaigns have intensified, voters know where the candidates stand on health care. And second, we asked voters about their preference for Democrat versus Republican candidates in a generic House race. As in the Senate, the higher the level of opposition to health reform, the greater the likelihood that the state's voters supported Republicans.

There are, of course, 10 months until the midterm elections. It is hard to predict the influence of an issue, even one as important as health care, this far in advance. But at a minimum, when incumbent Senate and House Democrats return home to campaign this fall, they will be explaining why they voted for a bill that so many of their constituents oppose.

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